

E. Issues Related to Performance Pay

Why is professional development important? What characteristics define successful professional development programs?

Over the past decade, federal, state, and local policymakers have emphasized the importance of ensuring that all students have access to high-quality teachers. However, despite devoting a great deal of attention to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, most states struggle to fill classrooms with teachers who possess the desired qualifications. One reason states and LEAs have failed is that they have significant teacher shortages due to high teacher attrition rates. For example, with 15.6% of teachers leaving the profession or changing schools, districts frequently must hire teachers who do not meet the required standards (Keigher & Cross, 2010; Marvel et al., 2007). Ladd and Fiske (2008) contend that quality professional development programs reduce teacher attrition and improve the quality of the existing teaching population. In addition, studies have found that professional development can improve teacher quality by changing teacher practices (Wenglinski, 2002). Thus, by helping to retain quality teachers and improving classroom practices, professional development programs could help policymakers realize their goal of ensuring that all students have access to high-quality teachers.

Scores on international tests suggest that U.S. students are lagging behind students in other developed nations, particularly in math at the elementary and middle school levels (Ladd & Fiske, 2008). For example, in 2009, American fourth-graders failed for the first time since 1990 to improve in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Cavanagh, 2009). Research indicates that effective professional development programs indirectly increase student performance by improving teacher instruction (Wenglinski, 2002). Moreover, programs that specifically focus on increasing content knowledge in math and science appear to have the largest impact on student test scores (Desimone et al., 2002). Therefore, states and LEAs could use professional development to increase student performance by improving classroom practices.

Professional development programs have changed significantly over the last several decades. Historically, professional development programs presented broad topics (e.g., classroom management) and rarely lasted more than a day or provided follow-up activities for teachers after the initial session ended. During the past decade, professional development programs have become more complex, often encouraging interaction between the teachers and the facilitator, providing instruction on specific

content, and/or relying on peer observations as an instructional tool (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Additionally, current programs last an extended period of time and provide refresher sessions after the teacher completes the program (Ingvarson et al., 2005). For example, the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teachings (NCCAT) requires teachers to attend its seminar programs for five days and offers alumni sessions for teachers who have completed their initial seminar (The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teachers, 2007).

Despite the fact that there is no one size fits all approach for professional development, a few characteristics are common to all effective programs. Researchers have concluded that successful programs are content specific—e.g., they focus on increasing one specific set of skills like math pedagogy or cooperative learning strategies (Heneman, Milanowski, & Kimball, 2007). Additionally, the programs have a common set of process standards (Ingvarson et al., 2005). For example, the professional development programs incorporate interaction among program participants into the lessons; invite teachers to critique their peers' classroom practices; provide chances for teachers to take on leadership roles; and include collective participation from teachers in the same school, grade, or department (Heneman et al., 2007). Successful programs also emphasize the importance of context-specific programs that are customized to the teacher's background, the demographics of the LEA in which the teacher works, and the student population that the teacher instructs (Borko, 2008; Ingvarson et al., 2005).

Desimone et al. (2002) suggest that the intensity and duration of a professional development program determine the degree of change in classroom practices. Researchers agree that teachers need between 75 and 100 hours of professional development per year before a program will create substantial changes in instructional practices (Heneman et al., 2007). However, teachers in the United States average only 13 hours of professional development per year. The dearth of quality professional development opportunities is particularly detrimental when considering that teachers who face some of the most challenging problems do not receive adequate professional development. For example, elementary school teachers in the United States, despite the nation's lagging test scores, receive only six hours of professional development on the delivery of math and reading instruction. Similarly, high school teachers receive less than 24 hours of annual instruction specific to the course they teach. As a consequence, many policymakers, administrators, and teachers mislabel professional development programs as ineffective because teachers rarely receive the continuous professional learning needed to incite a change in their classroom practices (Desimone et al., 2002).

Although there is some consensus in the research about the characteristics that define a successful professional development program, simply implementing programs with these characteristics will not ensure success. In many cases, success is contingent on unobservable characteristics like the commitment and enthusiasm of an organization's leaders or an instructor's willingness to adhere to the program's curriculum. Therefore, it is important

for policymakers and administrators to define desired measurable outcomes for students, teachers, and the organization (e.g., higher student test scores) and continually evaluate programs based on those outcomes. Without consistent evaluation, some ineffective programs will continue to receive funding because policymakers will not have the necessary information to make quality decisions about the efficacy of professional development programs.

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